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Catriona Clear, *Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 1960s*

When women of rural Ireland sat down with *Women's Way* after a day spent cleaning, cooking, and looking after children, what did they make of it? Did they images of metropolitan fashion give them a sense of longing for a seemingly out of reach affluence and glamour? And did they ever feel tempted to write in to the problem pages with their stories of isolation and overwork? These questions, for a long time out of the purview of Irish history, are the subject of Catriona Clear's new monograph on women's magazines in mid-century Ireland. It is notable that after the revisionist controversy which pulled almost the entirety of Irish history towards politics during the 1980s and 1990s, we are currently witnessing something of a flowering of social historical work on Ireland. Indeed, it may be relevant that this corresponds with the centenary of the Easter Rising, which has led scholars not only to re-examine these heady days but also look to examine the settlement that finally arose from the moments of the 'Irish Revolution'.

Clear has been a pioneer of this newly assertive Irish social history. In her new book, *Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 1960s* she seeks again to explore new ground, seeking to use the problem pages of women's magazines, with a particular focus on *Women's Way*, in order to explore women's lives during an axial moment in the history of the Irish state. To do so, she focuses on a select set of themes which reflect the sorts of letters the magazine published: the concerns of young people; sex and birth control; courtship and marriage; and parent and child relationships.

Women's Way and other similar magazines sold to Irish women stories of affluence, model homes, and domestic bliss largely influenced by the tone and format of their competitor publications from Britain. In this context, however, the problem pages provide a very different reading of social life in Ireland during this period—the reason women had a problem was usually because they saw themselves as failing to live up to the notional femininity the magazine propounded. In successive chapters therefore we read often painful stories of exhaustion, sexual coercion, familial bullying, and marital breakdown. These stories are telling. They provide glimpses of the

complexities of female subjectivity in a period of seeming increasing modernity and affluence, but also display the isolation of women who wrote anonymously to a magazine for advice.

However, if some problems could be shared, others remained hidden. Clear points out that despite the overwhelming numbers who emigrated in this period, the magazine made little mention of these women or the problems they might be facing. There are, however, other silences, which are probably related to class and social stigma: around the role of institutions in Irish life, the realities of urban poverty, or stories of abortion or other forms of birth control. This tension between the remarkable candidness of certain letters, and the elision of other topics is key. In later years discourses around 'hidden' Ireland or cultural 'silence' of mid-century in Ireland became a key marker against which 'new' Ireland was constructed. The stories contained in these letters show that there was much more debate going on than commentators of the 1990s suggested, that the contours between the said and the unsaid were frequently permeable and problematic, but also that the realm of women's magazines was perhaps seen as too lightweight to be considered part of a serious social discourse. As Clear's text shows, the stories of power, resistance, autonomy and subjectivity are far more complex than presented to us in the standard social histories of the period we currently rely on, if only historians know how and where to look.

While this book will be of crucial importance in furthering debates around women's lives in twentieth century Ireland, there are moments where it also felt like opportunities had been missed. Clear rather pulls her punches in setting out how her work challenges the established historiography of women in Ireland, and indeed, it would be good to see her be much more assertive here in using her considerable archival work in setting up a more trenchant argument. Moreover, one suspects that more could have been done with the sources if approached with more theoretical sophistication. The recent turn towards subjectivity, emotion, representation, and technologies of the self has produced an enormous quantity of material which could have been drawn on to pull of the tensions of individual agency and its mediation through genre, which will always be a central concern on a book on letter writing to magazines. Most notably, the thorny question of the extent to which these letters to the editor were re-written, fictionalized, or simply put in the bin, is addressed only

briefly but could have added substantially to Clear's analysis. Nonetheless, this will be an important study which will animate debate and add needed archival richness to debates on women's lives since partition.

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